

FIRST UPBREST DRESSED

A Diverting Tale of the Stage.
BY SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS.

BERTINE MALLORY sat up in bed and giggled. From the cot on the farther side of the room a cello contralto voice inquired: "What's the merry jest?"

"Look at the clock," Bertine Mallory said. "What about it?" "It's noon."

"Who cares?" "I do. We've got breakfast. So much to the good."

"Lunch?" queried the brunette with pessimistic intonation. Bertine Mallory giggled again. When Bertine Mallory giggled, you wanted to know. "I used to have a stomach."

"All gone. This Chicago air did it. As a banting diet it can't be beat."

"Yes; when you're thin you look like a little red-and-gold angel. But I'm getting fatter. How'm I going today with nothing inside me but a yearn?" moaned Mildred, the fellow sufferer. "Bertie, the show's a flop. It'll be lucky if it lasts out the week."

"Where does that leave us?" "Looking for another job."

"It's a punk season, and we haven't got the clothes to make a front before a manager."

"Between us we have," Bertine pointed out. "You can take the rig out for the air one day, and I the next."

"The black satin's pretty snappy still," mused Mildred. "With nice, fresh linen at the neck and the wrists and the little old algerette dancing on the hat, we've got to still throw a bluff. But outside of that—"

"Ginghams. Br-r-r-r-r!" shivered Bertine. She glanced at the door of an inner room. "What about Ethel?"

"Trailing a job, I think. Of course, if she doesn't have her chances by saying until she's landed it. What time did she get in last night?"

"About 3, I guess. She tried to tell me something, but I was too dead to the world."

"I'm going to dress and go down for the mail. I've a feeling there's something lucky for us," prophesied Mildred.

"Think somebody's written us a box of sardines?" inquired Bertine hopefully. "That'd be the most important mail I can think of. What's the matter, Mil?"

"Where's my silk petticoat?" Bertine began to rummage about. "Where are my brown stockings?"

"What's become of my tan shoes?" "Reported missing; one pair of gasoline-cleaned spats."

Bertie strode over to the decrepit wardrobe. "Our algerette's gone," she announced. Mildred threw open the door of the inner room. "So's Ethel's."

"She sure must be on the trail of something good or she wouldn't be stalking it this early. That's what she was trying to tell me last night."

"Well, we've got to dress anyway," said Mildred philosophically. "Come on; let's snap into the good old ginghams."

IN the midst of the process the door opened and the third member of the stranded trio revealed herself, posing magnificently on the threshold in a symposium of their collective most available garments. The two despoiled ones lifted a single voice: "You certainly do look like a million dollars."

"First up best dressed," pronounced the newcomer jauntily. "Girls, I've landed."

"No! What's the part?" "How much in it?"

"Not so bad for a bum season. Seventy-five per. It's a last-minute still-gin. Get on in the clothes and the hat. That's the way to land a job in bad times, my infants. How much have you got on hand?"

"The treasurer reports two dollars and forty-nine cents."

"And the ghost walks Saturday?" "Maybe."

"Well, you've got to make it go. I'll send back some of the first wad I lay my claws on. No advance yet except my ticket to Peoria for Sunday night."

"Couldn't you hook it for a mess of frankfurters and catch a ride on a truck?" suggested Bertine. "If you're looking for easy feed, Manderson's been inquiring for Milly and you."

"Manderson? That crooked shyster lawyer?"

"I suppose he is about as crooked as they make 'em," conceded Ethel. "And I wouldn't be seen dead with him, myself, on Broadway," Bertine asserted. "But in Chicago—who cares?"

"They say he's a bear with a menu card," murmured Mildred. "I'm not that hungry," snapped Bertine.

"And Wilbur's in town, too," pursued Ethel, looking at Bertine. "You've been seeing 'em all, haven't you?" observed the girl with rather too obvious carelessness.

"Quite a few. He wanted to know where he could get a job."

"You don't tell him!"

"No. But why pass up any possible meal tickets?" protested Mildred. "Tad Wilbur isn't a meal ticket."

"Well, don't bite me."

"Besides, you're wrong," added Ethel. "He is. He can be if he wants to. He's hit it with his invisible telephonic invention. The Kaplans have put it in all their New York houses, and he's out there placing it."

"That's fine," Bertine Mallory's expressive face brightened, but only for a moment. "I always thought it was a fly," she added dully. "Well, I'm off, children," said Ethel. "Got a lunch date. Oh, here's your mail."

"Aren't you going to shed any of our clothes?" inquired Mildred. "Now, how can I?" argued Ethel reasonably. "I'm feeding on the management, and I've got to live up to the new job."

"Of course you have," assented Bertine. "You're our one best bet. Take what you want, and good luck!"

"Turning to Mildred as Ethel went, she asked: 'Anything to eat in your mail?'"

"I'll say there is. Tommy Wright's giving a big supper jazz tonight, and we're both in on it."

"Hallelu-loo! Tommy's a liberal prophet."

"And there's a couple of seats for Blanche Hall's special matinee tomorrow."

"That's nice. Everybody'll be there, and we may snatch a job out of it."

"What's yours?" inquired Mildred, glancing at the letter in her friend's hand. "Oh, nothing. Forwarded note from Tad Wilbur saying he was coming to Chicago."

"You're going to see him, aren't you?" "No," said Bertine listlessly. "You used to run around with him a lot."

"Not a gray deal. I thought I was a little too risky for Tad. That was before the jinx hit me."

"Bertie, you don't really believe in jinxes and hoodoos and all that."

"Don't! I believe in this one. I keep it with me."

"Whatever for? Let's see it."

FROM the depths of her purse Bertine fished a much-folded, worn square of blue writing paper. Her friend read with astonishment this typed message:

"Dear Bertie, I thought I was a little too risky for Tad. That was before the jinx hit me."

"Bertie, you don't really believe in jinxes and hoodoos and all that."

"Don't! I believe in this one. I keep it with me."

"Whatever for? Let's see it."

"Collars and Cuffs." I played the fresh servant girl until this thing raised me out of the part. Haven't had a decent job since."

"But how did you get it?" "Some smart friend of Sid Rankine, who wrote the play, sent it to him. Wanted the part herself, very likely. Sid passed it on to me, and he passed it on to me with a fresh grin and my notice. He didn't like me, anyway, because—"

"Well, just one of those because's. Mildred nodded her comprehension. "Were you good in the part?"

"I was rotten," giggled Bertine. "But I could have worked into it."

"Mildred referred again to the paper: 'What's a fope?'"

"That's part of the jinx. I'm keeping it till I find out. Something French, though it's no word I ever came across."

"Throw the thing away," implored the other.

"I'm going to hang on to it," averred Bertine decisively. "until I meet the perfect lady that wrote it. And then I'm going to make her eat it."

"That'll chase the jinx."

"How do you know it's a her?" "By the catty sound of it. What are we going to wear tonight?"

"Looks like ginghams."

"What do you think Tommy is pulling? A fancy-dress party? No, ma'am! When you go to the theater, you brace Mrs. Westfall for the blue satin and the hat that you wear in the last act. You'll be a knockout."

"What about you?" "Keep your eye on the good old black satin." She exhumed that garment from the wardrobe and began to rip out the sleeves with deft fingers. "How to turn afternoon into evening," she remarked, performing some manipulations in the region of the neck. "Turned inside out and fussed up with some trimmings, this'll—create a marked impression as one of the new crepes that have just hit New York this season."

"You're a marvel, Bertie. But you can't wear a straw hat with that outfit."

"Can't I?" She dove into a drawer and emerged with another specimen of black satin, which she proceeded to adjust over the straw.

"With a bit of ruffie, which your new chemise is going to lend me by request, and the algerette, if Ethel ever comes back with it—ah, well—adap! You get that blue satin if you want to keep up with the parade."

WHILE Mildred was at the theater Bertine completed the transformation. Then, with the creation of the new dress, she laid out the two girls made a careful investment in enough food to carry them through the performance. That evening settled upon a hopeful uncertainty. The show was sure to flop.

"Who cares?" giggled Bertine as they hurried back to the hotel for their outfit. "You're a dream in that steely blue, Mil. Maybe you'll hit some manager a bang in the eye with that."

"Not if he sees you first in the black-and-white effect."

"I guess between us we'll make some of 'em blink," began Bertine as she opened the door and stepped dead.

The two girls stared at each other in awful silence. The bed was empty. The converted black satin, with all that pertained to it, was gone. Its owner recovered first.

"Ethel's been here," she observed. "Well, first up best dressed."

"Here's a note," said Mildred. "Gone out to dinner; leave the door unlatched." She began to whimper. "The mean, sneaky—"

"Cut it, Mil. We told her to dress the way she does it. Well, gingham for me," she echoed. "If you go that way, I'll go that way."

Bertine began divesting herself of her gorgeous blue raiment. "Gingham for me," she echoed. "If you go that way, I'll go that way."

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